The Strange Case of MARY PAGE

The Great McClure Mystery Story, Written by FREDERICK LEWIS In Collaboration With JOHN T. M'INTYRE, Author of the Ashton Kirk Detective Stories. *Read the Story and See the Essanay Moving Pictures*

First Episode

MARY'S DEFENSE

As Philip Langdon's car threaded its way through the heavy traffic, dodging drays and clamorous trolleys on its way toward the grim building where so many tragedies are staged by "the law" the young attorney felt his heart sink into engulfing waves of doubt and fear.

For the first time since the beginning of the trial he had lost his buoyant hope, his tremendous faith in his ability to prove Mary Page innocent and if need be to snatch her from a cell by the sheer power of his love.

The evidence was so overwhelming, so irrefutable. And Mary herself utterly unable to explain those last tragic moments. He knew she couldn't remember—couldn't explain. But the jury would not be convinced. He realized that.

Over and over in his brooding mind he saw again the tragedy of that night when the body of James Pollock, the clubman and wine agent, had been found with a bullet in its heart and beside it the unconscious figure of Mary Page. Between them had lain that revolver with its one accusatory empty chamber, the revolver that Mary herself admitted she had carried.

That Mary was innocent he had never doubted. His love was too great to admit of doubt, but he was a lawyer, and now he saw only too clearly that his defense might prove unconvincing in the face of the damnatory facts—first, that Mary had hated and feared James Pollock, who forced his attentions upon her; second, that she had carried the revolver hidden in the front of her dress when she went into the anteroom where Pollock was waiting, and, third, that the shooting had occurred directly after the door had closed upon the two of them.

If he, Langdon, had only been five minutes earlier—that was the acid that ate into his soul. If he had only reached that door five minutes sooner perhaps that fatal shot would never have been fired.

He wondered irritably why it was that the public, and that portion of it that comprised the jury, couldn't see how improbable it was that Mary would have ruined her career in such a fashion, however much she hated Pollock. It was inconceivable that a girl who at the falling of the curtain at 11 o'clock had touched the goal for which she had striven and been hailed as the greatest star of the century could have killed a man of her own accord at midnight and watched the dawn come from a cell in the Tombs.

He knew how much her career had meant to Mary. How close to her heart was the triumph and the fame, and to lose it this way—

He sighed heavily, then, realizing that they were approaching the Tombs and that to the world at least he must be the confident attorney, he straightened his shoulders and forced a smile to his lips.

Close to the curb two women were listening while a third read aloud from the early edition of an afternoon paper, stippling the monotony of her tones by ejaculations and questions.

From his car Langdon could plainly see the huge headlines two women were reading:

LOVER'S LAST FIGHT FOR LIFE.

State's Case Against Famous Actress Almost Complete—Young Lawyer Fights Final Hopeless Battle.

With a shudder of aversion Langdon dragged his eyes away. The notoriety of it was almost as bitter to him as the awful overshadowing fear. He hated to think that Mary's name should be dragged in the mud of common gossip as an actress who had shot a millionaire in the anteroom of a huge hotel, while just outside the door, amid laughter and music and lights, the great world indulged in supper dancing. He hated the thought that his love for Mary had become a spicy morsel to be rolled on the tongues of the general public, but, after all, what he had to bear was pitifully small compared to the burden on Mary's own slim shoulders.

The car drew up at the curb, and as Langdon leaped out somebody shouted harshly:

"Here's Langdon!" And the whole throng of men and women came surging toward him, sweeping him into the current of a wave of humanity. Jostling and staring, they flung a thousand questions at him, pulled at his arms and pressed against him until at last the impregnable doors clanged behind him, leaving him breathless with a feeling of being bruised and battered mentally as well as physically.

The quiet of the prison was almost like peace for the moment, but he knew that beyond that pool of silence in which he stood another clamorous throng surged about the door of the court and filled the room itself—thousands of them, some men and many women, voracious for sensation, glutted with the lure of this tremendous tragedy that was being played for them by living puppets. The law had indeed discovered the secret that every theatrical manager sighs to know—"what the public wants."

With a word or two to the officials, Langdon went hurriedly down the echoing corridors to Mary's cell; past row after row of monotonous barred doors, from behind which faces peered out with idle curiosity—faces, savage, despairing, dull with indifference or ravaged by tears. But they meant nothing to Langdon, for heart and brain alike were speeding on ahead of him to that distant narrow room where Mary waited.

At the cell door he halted and quickly removed his hat, unbidden tears springing to his eyes, for Mary was kneeling like a little child, her head in her mother's lap, and the elder woman was praying aloud:

"And God give us strength to go through this day and grant justice to this, my child!"

"Justice, dear God, justice!" echoed Mary. And no artistry of the great actress could have given to that simple prayer the poignancy that a great faith and a great sorrow gave to it.

Then they spied Langdon, and Mary, jumping up, gave a cry of joy and ran into his arms. He held her tightly, and the actress in her would have applauded if she had known the effort that lay back of his cheery greeting, his word of hope and the tender smile with which he put into her hand white roses to pin against her dark frock.

"I think we had better go on into court now," he said as she drew the blossoms through her belt. "The men are waiting, and it's about time, you know."

For an instant Mary shuddered and clung to him with closed eyes.

"If I could only be there without going across that awful bridge," she sighed. "Somehow the people are less terrible when they are sitting down and keeping quiet."

"I know, dear, I know," said Langdon sadly. "I wish to God I could spare you, but it's really only their way of expressing sympathy, and I'll give you a happy thought to say to yourself when you cross today. Just look straight ahead and say over and over: 'Today Philip begins my defense Today we will begin to prove my innocence.'"

"Then you think"—cried Mrs. Page.

"The state will undoubtedly rest its case this morning," he answered gravely. "Our chance is coming now."

"Oh, then I shan't mind anything," cried Mary and, kissing him, lifted her lovely head.

And now the end was almost come The last witness for the state was

"If I could only be there without going across that awful bridge."

called to the stand, and Langdon drew a deep breath. Unless some one was called in rebuttal he knew that now the final stone was to be laid in that carefully built tower of evidence against Mary Page.

The police had sworn that they saw Mary threaten James Pollock with a revolver in the park that afternoon. Employees of the theater had testified to her fear of his attentions; her own maid had been forced to admit with faltering tongue that her mistress had cried out that he was a devil, and she wished he was dead. Waiters and innumerable patrons of the Hotel Republic, revelling in the publicity, had told gloatingly of having seen Mary Page, drunk apparently, reel from the cafe on the night of the murder and go directly to the anteroom where James Pollock was waiting. And now the last man was on the stand—the hotel detective who, together with Langdon himself, had found the dead man with his living but unconscious companion.

The monotonous questions of name and age and occupation were rattled off swiftly enough, and then the detective, with the ease of one used to testimony, gave a brief resume of how he had first been called by the head waiter, to whom complaints had been made of the riotous behavior of a big supper party from one of the theaters.

"We found Mary Page lying in a faint."

"It was a pretty noisy bunch," he said coolly. "But they didn't seem to be doing any harm, so I just stood at the door watching them, and presently James Pollock came in.

"He was in evening dress," he continued, "and he called a bellhop and gave him a message, pointing out the young lady who was sitting at the head of the table with the noisy party."

"Was that young lady Miss Page?" asked the district attorney, indicating Mary with a jerk of his head.

"It was," said the detective firmly "Then Mr. Pollock went down to what we call the little gray room and, going in, shut the door. The bellhop started into the dining room, but almost before he'd taken a step the young lady, Miss Page, threw her wineglass on the floor with a hysterical sort of laugh and came reeling out of the room with her hands stretched out, as if she didn't know where she was going.

"I turned away to call one of the maids to take charge of her, and when I came back she was making straight for the gray room, walking as firmly as if she'd never had a drink in her life. She went in and shut the door, and a minute afterward Mr. Langdon there comes flying out of the cafe and shouts:

"'Which way did Miss Page go?'

"'In the gray room,' I answered, and with that he ran toward it, with me beside him, but before we got there we heard a shot, and"— He paused, enjoying to the full the sensation of the moment and the tense whispering wave of sound that quivered through the crowded room. "When we had broken in the door we found James Pollock shot through the heart and Mary Page lying in a faint beside him with a revolver not six inches from the ends of her fingers."

Mary, who had been watching him as if fascinated, quailed from that curt, almost vindictive, description of the finding of the bodies of the living and the dead, and, resting her arms on the edge of the dock, she buried her face in them and for the first time sobbed bitterly.

A murmur of sympathy arose, and several people stood up, only to be rudely pushed back into their seats by those behind. And now the district attorney, going to the grewsome array of "exhibits" in the case, picked up the revolver and, showing it to the jury, put it into the detective's hands.

"Is this the revolver," he demanded dramatically, "and is the prisoner the woman whom you found locked in the room with the dead body of James Pollock?"

"Yes," answered the detective. And at the word the pencils of the reporters began to spin like mad across the flaring yellow of their copy paper, and a gasp of dismay wrung from some woman's throat faded into a stifled sob.

One of the jurors blew his nose loudly, and two or three exchanged significant glances, and Langdon, the sweat beginning to bead his forehead, knew that they had already made up their minds that Mary was guilty.

The detective, released, stepped down from the witness box, and now the district attorney turned smilingly to the judge and said, with an oratorical flourish:

"Your honor, the state rests!"

The last stone in that brutal gallows of evidence had been cemented into place.

Four excited and self important office boys scuffled out of the room bearing sheets on which was scrawled:

"State rests its case after evidence of Detective Farley." And through the open door as they went came a murmur like the distant roar of wild beasts, the unadmitted public clamoring for the news borne by the boys en route for the newspaper offices.

But when the door closed again a tense silence held the room in thrall. Even Mary's sobs had ceased, and, lifting her tear stained face, she smiled rainbow wise at Langdon, as if she would have said: "Now is our chance! Now we will tear down this awful temple of doom that has been built for me!"

Langdon drew a deep breath, flung back his shoulders as if breasting a tremendous current and said quietly:

"Your honor and gentlemen of the jury, you have heard the case against Mary Page. Now listen to the case for Mary Page.

"She has declared herself that she has no recollection of those final moments in that hotel room to which she had been lured by a miserable beast. She remembers only a flash—like a dream—of his leering face, and then blackness swept over her. Gentlemen, it is not the first time that Miss Page has been affected in that same fashion. And if Mary Page killed James Pollock she did it in a moment of insanity superinduced by the horror of intoxication that has pursued her since the day she was born."

As with one accord the jury sat up and leaned forward in their seats, and onlookers broke out into a sudden babble, in which the word "insane" bobbed like a cork on a sea of rumor, and not even the judge's gavel could secure silence for several moments. In that time the color crept back into Mary's cheeks, and somehow she felt deep in her heart that the tide of feeling at least was turned again in her direction.

The district attorney was frowning and whispering to his assistant, who nodded from time to time as he nervously fingered the pile of papers in front of him, but now Langdon was speaking again:

"It is my intention, your honor and gentlemen of the jury, to show you step by step through this girl's life the part which that horror of intoxication has played, a horror that has entangled her in this mesh of tragedy. I shall call as my first witness Mary Page."

It came as an overwhelming surprise, this calling of Mary to her own defense, and, although she strove to be calm, she was obviously startled and afraid, and wave after wave of excitement swept through the room. At the reporters' table one "sob sister" whispered to the other:

"Poor thing! She can't stand much more. It's wicked to call on her."

"Miss Page," said Langdon, and his voice was very gentle, "isn't it true that because of a strong prenatal influence you were born with an unnatural horror of intoxication?"

"It is true," sighed Mary, but in an instant the district attorney was on his feet.

"I object!" he cried. "That question concerns something that took place before Miss Page's birth. She can—she must, in fact—know it only by hearsay."

"I must sustain your objection," said the judge. "Mr. Langdon, your question was unfortunately worded. Can you alter it?"

"I think I can," said Langdon. "Let us put it this way: What is your earliest recollection of your father?"

"I object to that also!" stormed the district attorney. "It is not relevant. What have a child's vague recollections to do with the action of a woman of Miss Page's age?"

The judge hesitated, and Langdon, still smiling, said quickly:

"I withdraw my question. The witness is excused."

"Do you wish to cross examine?" asked the judge, and the district attorney, with a scowl, shook his head.

"Are—are you through with me?" gasped Mary in bewilderment, and Langdon nodded. And now, as the throng waited, he turned to the little gray haired mother, and his voice rang out (was it with triumph?):

"Mrs. Page!"

In an instant the room was in an uproar. More copy boys rushed for the door bearing flapping sheets covered with scrawled, disjointed words, and the onlookers, who had so far considered Mrs. Page as merely a "prop," a bit of the setting in this gripping tragedy, now scrambled up on to their seats to gape at her. In vain the judge thundered with his gavel, and in vain the police shoved back the spectators and even thrust one or two belligerent ones out into the corridor, where they were welcomed with a roar from the waiting. The noise did not subside until curiosity had been sated.

"Mrs. Page, how long ago was it that you met your husband, Daniel Page?"

"Thirty-one years ago at Christmas," she said softly, and the district attorney leaned forward scowlingly, waiting to leap at the first irrelevant question.

"And you became engaged almost at once, did you not?" The question and the answer were equally quiet.

"Yes."

"But you were not married for some time?"

"No." The gentle old voice shook now, and a faint flush crept into the thin cheeks.

"Why?" The question snapped sharply, but her answer was long in coming.

"Because," she said at last, "I found that Dan drank, and I—I said I would not marry a man like—like that."

"But you did later on?"

"Yes," she continued. "He promised me that he would stop, and I believed—God knows a woman always believes that—from a man."

"Please make only direct answers to the questions," broke in the judge sternly. But some woman in the back of the room said aloud:

"That's the truth she's speaking. Let her say it."

"Silence!" commanded the judge. And now Langdon said:

"Will you tell us as concisely as possible of what happened after your marriage?"

For a long time it seemed as if she could not go on, and Mary leaned toward her, whispering softly:

"Oh, mother—mother, darling!" But as if the words were a draft of encouragement Mrs. Page took up the thread of her story.

"What happened," she said wearily, "is what happens to thousands of women. We hadn't been married very long before my husband began to drink again. The—the first night he came home really drunk was the night I had planned to tell him that Mary was coming to us from God. I don't think I shall ever forget the horror of that time. And all the while that I was making ready for her he was making my inability to go out with him an excuse for debauch.

"Oh, your honor," and now she turned to the judge, "it's no wonder my child is full of the fear of drink. For night after night I walked the floor, and I prayed like a wicked woman that my baby might die before it came into the world—because I was afraid it would bear the taint—would be born with that awful devastating thirst!"

More than one man in the room and, indeed, more than one of the jurors moved uneasily at the words, quietly spoken, but pregnant with tragedy.

"On the night that Mary was born," she went on, "Dan was too drunk to even be told—that—he had a daughter."

A murmur of sympathy crept through the room, and one voice could be heard distinctly:

"Oh, well, that's not unusual. Most men do—beastly drunk."

"I felt then," said Mrs. Page tenderly, "that it didn't matter. I had my baby, and I was too full of happy dreams for her future to fear for the present.

"Somehow," Mrs. Page continued, "the years passed, and Mary reached sixteen, but each of those increasing years had increased her fear of drunkenness. She was even afraid of her father, and because we were too poor for her to have pretty clothes she

"Dan was too drunk to be told he had a daughter."

could not go to the parties and things like other girls. And I suppose my own horror kept building and blending with hers—until—that—day."

She broke off, and now Langdon was on his feet, a red spot of color in each cheek and his hands nervously clutching a scrap of paper as he asked sharply:

"What day do you refer to, Mrs. Page?"

"To the 16th of June ten years ago," she answered.

"Will you tell us why that day is so clearly remembered?" asked Langdon.

"Because," she answered deliberately, "that was the night of Mary's first wild attack!"

"I object!" shouted the district attorney, but the judge frowned.

"This seems to me to be particularly relevant to Mr. Langdon's somewhat curious defense," he said. "I will let the question and answer stand."

"Will you tell us," said Langdon, "what brought on that attack and what you know of it? Don't tell it to me, but to the jury, who were not there."

"I understand," she said softly, and Langdon sat down, overwhelmed by his own recollections of that terrible night and wondering where the frail little woman was getting the strength for the ordeal.

"It was early evening," said Mrs. Page, turning to the jurors. "Philip—Mr. Langdon—had come to ask Mary to go to a ball game with him, for they were friends even then," she explained tenderly. "And while they were standing on the porch my—my—husband came home—drunk. He saw the two of them and accused them of improper and insulting language. He didn't mean it—he didn't know what he was saying—but it was terrible for Mary, and she urged Philip to leave at once. I heard them—and heard Dan's words—and I ran out to help, leaving the poker thrust into the hot coals of the range, for I had been fixing the fire.

"We—we got Dan into the house and on to a sofa in the kitchen at last, where he lay babbling about James Pollock, with whom he had been drinking and who was also—or who had tried to be—a friend of my daughter's."

Again the whispering murmur of excitement swept through the room, but died of its own accord.

"Dan slept for a long time, and when he woke up he wanted more to drink.

"I heard James Pollock make an insulting taunt."

I had sent Mary to bed, and I was alone with him. I tried to reason with him, but he forgot I was his wife. He was insane with that awful thirst. He ordered me to bring him the bottle of whisky out of his cabinet, and when I wouldn't he—he beat me. He threw me down and kicked me and struck me with a chair. And, though I tried to keep back a cry that would rouse Mary, she—she heard and came running down, poor child, in her little nightdress.

"She screamed and ran forward and dragged at her father. Trying pitifully to protect me—and at last—he turned—upon her."

She shuddered and buried her face in her hands—her eyes tear blinded and her mouth distorted with the anguish of memory.

"And then—he saw—the poker—I had forgotten—still thrust into the fire—and he dragged it out."

A quivering moan like a vocal echo to her mental agony slipped from Mary's lips, and dropping her head, she sobbed aloud.

"Please go on, Mrs. Page," said Langdon warningly, and though the mother yearned toward her daughter, she took up her story again in a voice that rose word by word into a poignant cry straight from a mother's anguished soul.

"He dragged Mary to the center of the room—that flaming poker in his hand. He forced her to her knees. I struggled to get to them, but I was weak—dazed, half conscious because of a blow on the head. It was all just a nightmare to me! But I heard Mary scream and scream and scream, and then—I saw—the poker burn into my child's forehead! I smelled the scorched flesh and from somewhere I got the strength to leap upon him—and then—the door was burst open and—Mr. Langdon came in.

"He—he had been worried about us," she panted, her voice breaking now, "and, coming back to the house, heard the cries. My husband rushed at him and they fought. Then suddenly Mary, who had been lying in a moaning little heap on the floor, writhed—got to her knees—to her feet—and before I could stop her, began to dance wildly about the two men, laughing and shouting and singing. And then, while we stood there appalled, even Dan—sobered by it—she ran on—out of the house—and into the street.

"Philip was after her in a moment. But it seemed hours before I could crawl to the door, and I saw—Mary disappearing down the street—and heard James Pollock make an insulting taunt. Then I was knocked down by my husband, who rushed by me with an oath.

"When I got up again Mr. Langdon was out of sight, and Dan and James Pollock were lying huddled in the path struggling to get to their feet."

Her voice dropped now and she finished quietly, firmly.

"Three hours later Philip brought Mary home—wrapped in his coat. Her nightgown was in ribbons; her feet were torn and bloody where she had danced and run over stones and stumps in the woods near our home. Her hands were bruised from snatching at trees and rocks by the way. She was in torture with the burn on her forehead, but she was—quite sane. And, your honor, she had no recollection of anything that had happened after she saw her father advancing with the red-hot poker."